Our next writing assignment will be an in-class essay, along the lines of the SAT Essay. The text will be a challenging one, an excerpt from Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (found at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/jacobs/jacobs.html>). Before starting, here are some quotes from *12 Years a Slave* that are connected to Jacobs’ text.

ELIZA (to Solomon)

When I say I had my master’s favor, you understand. Above even his own wife, I had it. Do you know that he built a house for me? Built it on the sole condition that I reside there with him. The added promise in time I would be emancipated. And for nine years he blessed me with every comfort and luxury in life… Silks and jewels and even servants to wait upon us. Such was our life, and the life of this beautiful girl I bore for him. But Master Berry's daughter...she always looked at me with an unkind nature. She hated Emily, no matter she and Emily were flesh of flesh. As Master Berry's health failed, she gained power in the household. Eventually, I was brought to the city on the false pretense of our free papers being executed. If I had known what waited, to be sent south? I swear I would not have come here alive.

SOLOMON (to Mistress Shaw, African-American plantation mistress who is hosting Patsey for tea)

Master Epps has somehow come to believe, as incorrectly as it may be, that Master Shaw is... That he is something of a lothario and an unprincipled man. A misguided belief born out of their mutual competition as planters, no doubt.

MISTRESS SHAW

No doubt...if not born outta truth itself… You worry for me? Got no cause to worry for my sensibilities. I ain't felt the end of a lash in 'mo years than I cain recall. Ain't worked a field, neither. Where one time I served, now I got others servin' me. The cost to my current existence be Massa Shaw broadcasting his affections, 'n me enjoyin' his pantomime of fidelity. If that what keep me from the cotton pickin' niggers, that what it be. A small and reasonable price to be paid 'fo sure… (Looking toward Patsey, speaking with great empathy.) I knowed what it like to be the object of Massa's predilections and peculiarities. And I knowed they can get expressed with kindness or wit violence. A lusty visit in the night, or a visitation from the whip. And wit my experience, if'n I can give comfort, then comfort I give. And you take comfort, Patsey; the Good Lord will manage Epps. In His own time the Good Lord will manage dem all ...the curse on the Pharaohs is a poor example of all that wait 'fo the plantation class.

MISTRESS EPPS (to Epps, after Solomon has returned with Patsey)

What is it? Ya cain't remain the Sabbath without her [Patsey] under your eye? Ya are a no-account bastard… A filthy, godless heathen. My bed is too holy for yah ta share.

Ridley, John. *12 Years a Slave* (screenplay adapted from the memoir by Solomon Northup). 20th Century Fox,

2013. Drexel University, 2017. <http://www.pages.drexel.edu/~ina22/splaylib/>

Screenplay-12\_Years\_a\_Slave.pdf.

SAT Essay Prompt

*As you read the passage below, consider how Harriet Jacobs uses*

*• evidence, such as facts or examples, to support claims.*

*• reasoning to develop ideas and to connect claims and evidence.*

*• stylistic or persuasive elements, such as word choice or appeals to emotion, to add power to the ideas expressed.*

1. Read and annotate the passage below. Pronunciations of some more difficult words are provided.
2. Re-read the text, and circle words you do not know — afterwards, try to figure out meanings from context, discuss them with a classmate, or look them up in a dictionary. Note meanings of the words you circle in the margins.
3. Answer in writing the questions in the footnotes.

No pen can give an adequate description of the all-pervading corruption produced by slavery. The slave girl is reared in an atmosphere of licentiousness [lie-SEN-shee-us-ness] and fear. The lash and the foul talk of her master and his sons are her teachers. When she is fourteen or fifteen, her owner, or his sons, or the overseer, or perhaps all of them, begin to bribe her with presents. If these fail to accomplish their purpose,[[1]](#footnote-1) she is whipped or starved into submission to their will. She may have had religious principles inculcated by some pious mother or grandmother, or some good mistress; she may have a lover, whose good opinion and peace of mind are dear to her heart; or the profligate [PROFF-lih-get] men who have power over her may be exceedingly odious [OH-dee-us] to her. But resistance is hopeless.

                        "The poor worm

                        Shall prove her contest vain. Life's little day

                        Shall pass, and she is gone!"

        The slaveholder's sons are, of course, vitiated [VISH-ee-ate-ed], even while boys, by the unclean influences every where around them.[[2]](#footnote-2) Nor do the master's daughters always escape. Severe retributions sometimes come upon him [i.e. the slaveholder] for the wrongs he does to the daughters of the slaves. The white daughters early hear their parents quarreling about some female slave. Their curiosity is excited, and they soon learn the cause. They are attended by the young slave girls whom their father has corrupted; and they hear such talk as should never meet youthful ears, or any other ears.[[3]](#footnote-3) They know that the women slaves are subject to their father's authority in all things; and in some cases they exercise the same authority over the men slaves. I have myself seen the master of such a household whose head was bowed down in shame; for it was known in the neighborhood that his daughter had selected one of the meanest [meaning “lowest” here] slaves on his plantation to be the father of his first grandchild. She did not make her advances to her equals, nor even to her father's more intelligent servants. She selected the most brutalized, over whom her authority could be exercised with less fear of exposure.[[4]](#footnote-4) Her father, half frantic with rage, sought to revenge himself on the offending black man; but his daughter, foreseeing the storm that would arise, had given him free papers, and sent him out of the state.

        In such cases the infant is smothered, or sent where it is never seen by any who know its history. But if the white parent is the *father*, instead of the mother, the offspring are unblushingly reared for the market.[[5]](#footnote-5) If they are girls, I have indicated plainly enough what will be their inevitable destiny.[[6]](#footnote-6)

        You may believe what I say; for I write only that whereof I know [“that I know about”]. I was twenty-one years in that cage of obscene birds. I can testify, from my own experience and observation, that slavery is a curse to the whites as well as to the blacks. It makes the white fathers cruel and sensual; the sons violent and licentious; it contaminates the daughters, and makes the wives wretched.[[7]](#footnote-7) And as for the colored race, it needs an abler pen than mine to describe the extremity of their sufferings, the depth of their degradation.[[8]](#footnote-8)

        Yet few slaveholders seem to be aware of the widespread moral ruin occasioned by this wicked system. Their talk is of blighted cotton crops—not of the blight on their children's souls.[[9]](#footnote-9)

        If you want to be fully convinced of the abominations of slavery, go on a southern plantation, and call yourself a negro trader. Then there will be no concealment; and you will see and hear things that will seem to you impossible among human beings with immortal souls.[[10]](#footnote-10)

SAT Essay Directions

*Write an essay in which you explain how Harriet Jacobs builds an argument to persuade her audience that harms all people involved in it — men and women, whites and blacks alike. In your essay, analyze how Jacobs uses one or more of the features in the directions that precede the passage (or features of your own choice) to strengthen the logic and persuasiveness of her argument. Be sure that your analysis focuses on the most relevant features of the passage.*

*Your essay should not explain whether you agree with Jacobs’ claims, but rather explain how Jacobs builds an argument to persuade her audience.*

Step 1: Talk with your classmates, and take notes — what are the most significant strategies you see Jacobs using to make her argument? Take notes on each of the things you discuss.

Step 2: From the list and notes in your previous step, identify the 3 things you want to write about in your essay. Make notes, and find quotes, to illustrate these — remember that you want to write a paragraph about each one, explaining how doing each helps Jacobs make her argument.

Step 3: Construct a brief introduction. A strong introduction will include each of the following (but not necessarily put each in its own sentence)…

1. A “hook” or general statement about Jacobs’ subject.
2. Something about who Harriet Jacobs is, and her audience.
3. Jacobs’ argument — her purpose in writing.
4. The three strategies you see Jacobs using to accomplish her purpose, and that you will analyze in your essay.

Step 4: Draft your essay, including an introduction, three thorough and thoughtful body paragraphs, and a brief conclusion (include why Jacobs is writing and the three strategies you see her using to accomplish her purpose)

Step 5: Review your work, and edit and proofread before handing it in.

1. Make an inference here: what is the “purpose” that these men had in bribing the slave girl with presents? [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Summarize and paraphrase this sentence, using your understanding of the word “vitiated” — how are the sons of slaveholders affected by what goes on around them? How do they learn to act towards slave women? [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. What are the *two* ways slaveowners’ daughters find out about what happens to young slave women? [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. What had this slaveholder’s daughter done? [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. What happens to these children, with slave mothers and masters as fathers? [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. What will that destiny be? [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Be sure you understand what Jacobs is getting at —

   how or why does slavery make white fathers cruel and sensual?

   how or why does it make their sons violent and licentious?

   how or why does it contaminate their daughters?

   how or why does it make their wives wretched? (“wretched” in the way they feel and/or act) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. What are the particular ways in which Jacobs describes black slaves suffering and being degraded in this passage? [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Jacobs uses blight literally and figuratively here. Why are blighted crops a bad thing? What is the blight on the slaveowners’ children’s souls? (try to say more than just “slavery”) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Jacobs writes in the introduction to her book that her desired audience is educated, white, free, women in northern states. Because of the horrible things she writes about, the manners of her audience, and her own morality, she uses *euphemism* — delicate, indirect language — to hint at the abuses she writes about, rather than name them directly. Looking back, where is the first moment a reader can figure out exactly what she is talking about? [↑](#footnote-ref-10)